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THINKING LIKE A HORSE SIMPLIFIES TRAINING

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Effective trainers understand how horses perceive their world, what motivates them and how they learn. Attributing human qualities to horses can spell trouble for horse owners, handlers and trainers. Understanding how a horse thinks makes training safer and more effective.

HORSES ARE SOCIAL, HERD ANIMALS

A horse finds comfort and safety within a herd. The alpha horse, or leader, is the one that makes the decisions (time to go for water, shelter, or to rest); the subordinates trust and follow. The alpha animal is often an older horse that is more dominant and has earned respect within the herd/group.

To be effective, the trainer must be the alpha horse and, therefore, the decision maker. The trainer decides on the exact path to be travelled, where and how long to stand still and the pace at which to move. This takes a lot of energy and planning. To secure the alpha status, the trainer must tell the horse what to do from the moment he or she walks the horse out of the stall. The trainer must have a lesson plan for every step from the barn aisle, to leading to the paddock, to mounting, to riding figures in the schooling ring.

Alpha horses confirm their dominance by moving their subordinates into retreat with a threatening gesture. No one has permission to step into their personal space uninvited. After retreating, the subordinate will open and close his mouth in a chewing motion. It is one of the ways he acknowledges the alpha and is seen frequently in training. Body language is the major way horses communicate, and trainers must do the same. As a regular exercise, throughout the training process, ask your horse to step away (either backwards or to the side) and yield to pressure applied to any part of his body. Handlers who step back when lungeing (longeing) or in the barn aisle are unaware that they are sending the horse the signal that he is the boss.

Be aware that you are always training. Inconsistency, being cuddly and permissive on one occasion and slapping and jerking the horse around when he pushes too far on another occasion, is confusing to him and simply unfair.

HORSES ARE PREY ANIMALS, NOT PREDATORS

Prey animals need to be more perceptive than predators in order to survive. When they perceive frightening stimuli, they flee and don't stop to ask questions. This fright/flight response is the source of the instant reaction time experienced by riders trying to stay on board during a spook. As the alpha "horse," humans can train horses to trust them in the presence of something spooky, and thus override the flight response. Through repetition, trainers can desensitize horses, so they will not spook at a scary object.

Riders are often quick to lose patience with a horse that seems to spook at imaginary ghosts, but they should remember that a horse perceives far more than humans realize. Programmed to be on the lookout for danger, horses are quicker to detect stimuli than humans and have a wider field of vision because their eyes are situated on the sides of their heads. They see things directly in front by turning their heads slightly from side to side. Their wide field of vision allows them to see most of what lurks to the side and behind them. Horses can also hear a wider frequency of sounds than humans and, with ears that swivel around like radar dishes, they can localize the source of the sound.

If a horse is trapped and cannot find a way to flee from what's frightening him, he will fight. Picture a horse pulling back when tied or having his leg tangled in a fence. Trainers must always provide a way out, or an open door. When the trainer asks the horse to bend with the inside rein, the outside rein needs to give. Freedom is a reward. In the words of the well-known trainer Ray Hunt, "Make the wrong thing difficult and the right thing easy." The trainer should avoid creating fright. Emotions and adrenaline do not foster learning. The

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horse can only think of fleeing the situation, and his movements become quick and unnatural, rather than soft and calm.

Creating fright during training is used only when a horse has exhibited truly aggressive behaviour, such as kicking or biting; the trainer must then assert his or her dominant status. When the horse responds positively, he should receive an instant reward. It is important for horsemen and horsewomen to be in control of their emotions, as well as the timing and intensity of their cues.

HORSES LEARN DIFFERENTLY THAN HUMANS

The horse brain is structured differently than the human brain, which might explain some of the frustration people encounter when they try to use human logic in training.

The horse has a far smaller ratio of brain size to body size than the human. Much of the human's comparatively large brain is dedicated to the cerebrum, which processes thought and controls memory, communication and association. The horse's brain, however, is largely cerebellum, the part that is responsible for gross muscle coordination, balance and body functions, and thought to be involved in learning patterns of movement [1].

During a training session, the horse cannot be counted on to interpret and reason through a skill. Horses learn by repetition and drill, and come to associate cues with movements.

In the human brain, there is a mass of neural fibres that connect and communicate between the two hemispheres of the brain. Previously, researchers thought that there were relatively few of these connective fibres in the equine brain, which suggested there was also less transfer of information from one side to the other [2]. This hypothesis has been discounted [3]. The new research, however, does not explain why:

- a horse suddenly spooks at an object that he's passed by multiple times going in one direction when asked to travel by it going the other way.
- when a horse has mastered the turn on the haunches to the right, the turn to the left seems to be a completely new skill to him.

Horses must be schooled equally on both sides of the body. Little time is saved when schooling the second side.

The next time you think — My horse is having a bad day; my horse is just stubborn; our personalities clash — remember: Horses and humans are wired differently.

Try thinking like a horse!

Books and/or articles written by Dr. Robert Miller, Dr. Temple Grandin and John Lyons provide further information on horse psychology.

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